First of a Series on

LIFE IN A MEXICAN TOWN

MEXICO
ITS COUNTRY AND PEOPLE

by

EDITH FLEMING

Raymond Foundation

Museum Stories, No. 393

March 3, 1962

Mexico—Its Country and People

Mexico is a land of great contrast, contrast in the kind of country and the plants that grow there and contrast in the people. To the south in Mexico and on both coasts are the lowland tropical forests. In the north are dry lands and deserts. Central Mexico, where most of the people live, is a high fertile plateau surrounded by mountains. It is high enough to have fairly cool and comfortable weather even though it is in the tropics. In Mexico weather changes depend not so much on how close you are to the equator as on how high you climb.

Most people in Mexico are Indians, a few are of Spanish descent, and many are both Indian and Spanish. Some Indians still live in tribes, but others, especially in the capital, Mexico City, live much as do people in the United States. Between these two ways of life are most of the people of Mexico—small farmers living in towns and villages.

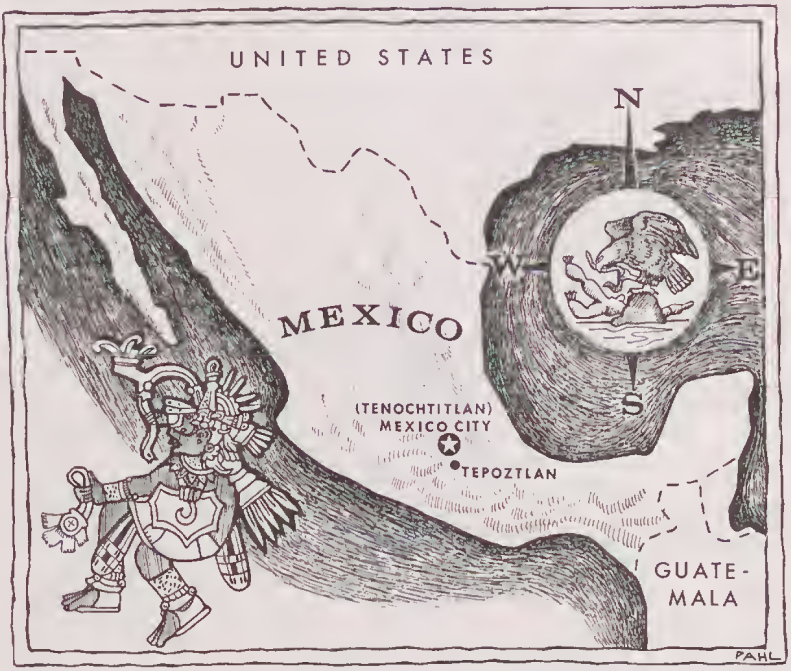
In the Valley of Mexico on the high plateau the people farm today much as their ancestors did hundreds, even thousands, of years ago. These modern Indians are descendants of the Aztecs who were conquered by the Spanish. But long before the Aztecs were important in the Valley of Mexico other groups had developed a great civilization. The Indians of Mexico are related to the Indians of North and South America and, like some of the tribes you know about in the United States, they were once, thousands of years ago, wanderers and food-gatherers. But they learned to farm and then they could settle down in one place all year around. Little farming villages must have grown up where people raised corn and beans in their small plots, just as the Mexican farmers do today.

After many years these farming people became civilized, worked out an elaborate religion, and built wonderful cities that, strangely enough, were not to live in but were for the worship of their gods. Their cities were built around a central plaza, which was surrounded by temples built on top of great pyramids where priests sacrificed to their gods. This civilization called Teotihuancan flourished for hundreds of years in

the Valley of Mexico, but gradually it lost its power to other groups. Many years later the Aztecs became important.

In the beginning the Aztecs were only wandering tribes moving about from place to place, now settling down for a year or two and then moving on again. Finally they reached the lakes of Mexico where civilized people were already living. In a fierce battle they were defeated and forced to flee to the islands in the lakes. There they stayed and, little by little, began to take on the ways of their neighbors. After awhile they were able to conquer some of the nearby cities and then those farther away. Their city of Tenochtitlan, built on the islands, grew great and beautiful, and at the time of the Spanish Conquest the Aztecs were the most important people in Mexico.

Find Mexico City on the map. Its old name was Tenochtitlan. Now find Tepoztlan, whose people paid tribute to the Aztecs and whose descendants still live in the same place. We will follow their history from 1515 to the present day.



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Second of a Series on

LIFE IN A MEXICAN TOWN

TRIBUTE BEARERS OF ANCIENT MEXICO

by

EDITH FLEMING

Raymond Foundation

Museum Stories, No. 394

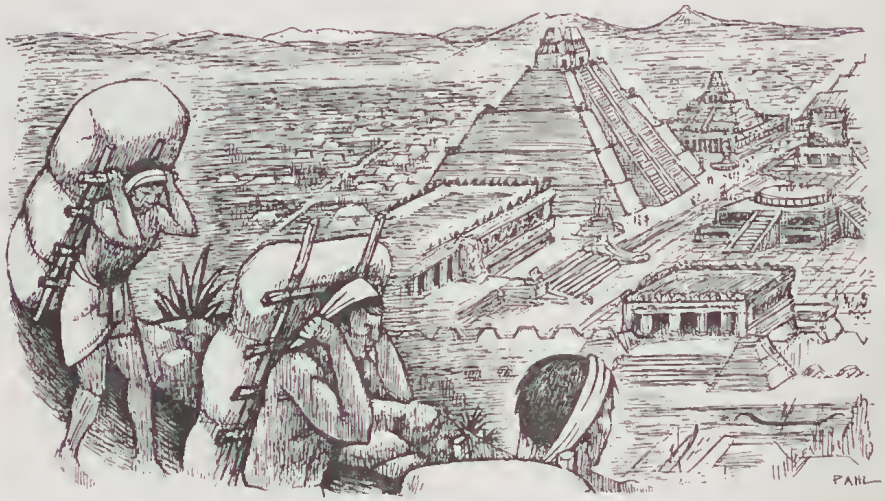
March 10, 1962

Tribute Bearers of Ancient Mexico

Let us imagine that we are in Mexico in the year 1515, a few years before Cortez conquered the country. We have joined a train of tribute bearers carrying bundles of paper from Tepoztlan, a village in the mountains beyond the Valley of Mexico. For weeks the people of Tepoztlan have been preparing tribute for the Aztec conquerors, especially the amatl paper (made from the bark of a tree), which will be made into books for keeping records. The carriers are loaded and start on the march to Tenochtitlan, the capital, that is now Mexico City.

At last the caravan sights the great island-city and the carriers go at a dogtrot over the man-made causeway that connects it with the mainland. Around the edge of the island farmers paddle their canoes among the tiny farms that are "floating" gardens—huge flat baskets of earth supported by wooden piles. The roots of the plants reach the bottom of the shallow lake and anchor them in place. Small farmhouses appear amid the greenery.

There are no roads except the three broad causeways that lead into the city, but canals make streets for boats. As we travel farther into the city, we begin to see larger homes plastered white or dull red. Our causeway becomes a main street. Everywhere groups of people promenade or sightsee, and an



important man saunters by sniffing a bouquet of flowers as is the custom. Through the crowd the procession of bearers threads its way, each man carrying his load on his back because there were no wheeled carts in old Indian Mexico.

In the center of town the buildings give way to a great open plaza where stand tall pyramids topped by temples. Here we leave the carriers with their tribute and take the highway leading to the north end of the island and another great communal square. This one is a market where merchants have piled their vegetables in gay patterns on woven mats. There are tomatoes, squash, beans, chili peppers, and, from the lowlands, avocados, and pineapples. In the arcade that surrounds the market more merchants are carrying on a lively business, bartering with the customers because there was no money (cacao, or chocolate, beans were sometimes used as a means of exchange).

Two boys see a vendor asleep and are trying to steal a piece of fruit, but they don't notice the juvenile officer behind them ready to make an arrest. Over there are stacks of cotton mantles, but two women have chosen the same one and are fighting over it. A little boy in the pottery market is howling. He put a jar over his head to see if it would fit. It fitted so well that he can't get it off. His mother is scolding and pulling at the jar so hard that his feet scarcely touch the ground. The merchant watches calmly. The jar is costly. No matter if it is broken, he will be paid. Right in the middle of the market a barber is cutting a man's hair with a long stone knife made of obsidian, or volcanic glass.

In the flower section zinnias, dahlias, marigolds, and cosmos make masses of color. Canoes filled with fish are being unloaded at the end of the canal, and the smell of fish mixes with the odor of flowers and fruit.

People crowd the market, and the broad street leading into it teems with more people pushing and jostling their way in. A steady hum of voices fills the air as the bargaining goes on. We go out of the city by the northern causeway, leaving behind the sounds and smells of the market place.

Be sure to look at the Museum's Aztec Market in Hall 8.

This page is for your own notes and illustrations

Third of a Series on

LIFE IN A MEXICAN TOWN

THE CONQUEST OF MEXICO

by

EDITH FLEMING

Raymond Foundation

Museum Stories, No. 395

March 17, 1962

The Conquest of Mexico

By the year 1521 a small army of Spanish conquered the great Aztec empire. How could so few conquer so many? What was the Aztec nation like to give up so easily? Was Montezuma, its chief, to blame? These are questions that have been asked over and over again in the hundreds of years since the conquest of Mexico.

There are many answers to these questions. In the first place, the Aztec empire was in trouble already. The Aztecs had conquered many city-states that were restless, seething with plots to overthrow their conquerors, and ready to join with anyone in revolt. Besides that, the Aztecs had no real king. The Spanish thought Montezuma was the absolute ruler of the Aztecs, but he was really only their most important citizen. He had little real power and could be deposed if he did not satisfy the council. This made it difficult for him to act.

To add to this, strange signs and wonders had filled the people with fear. A comet had been seen by day, sudden violent waves had swept across the lake that surrounded the capital, and two temples had been destroyed in mysterious ways. When stories reached the city of men riding great animals, the Aztecs wondered if these were men or gods. If gods, they should be honored; if men, they must be destroyed. What should they do! Fear kept them from acting.

Cortez began his march inland at the end of summer, a good time for the invaders because the Aztecs were busy in the fields and had no time for warfare. In any case, they were no match for the Spanish with their crossbows and canons and their terrifying horses. The Spanish were trained to fight, to kill the enemy, and to conquer, but the Indians wanted only to take prisoners and exact tribute. They did not understand European warfare.

When Cortez and his conquistadors reached Tenochtitlan, the capital, Montezuma received them kindly. In return the Spanish made him a prisoner and looted the city. At last the Aztecs rose up against the enemy. They bottled the Spaniards

up in one section of the city and cut off their escape. But early one morning the Spaniards crept through the sleeping city and had almost reached safety when an Indian woman saw them and gave the alarm. The Aztecs sprang up, swarmed over the housetops, and drove the enemy into the water. Laden with their heavy armor and stolen gold many Spaniards sank to the bottom. One conquistador used his lance to pole vault across the broken causeway. It was only after fierce fighting that the Spanish reached safety.

Later the Texcocan Indians, who were jealous of the Aztecs, sided with the Spanish. The Spanish now had access to the lakes and so Cortez built a fleet of ships and re-entered the city. But as fast as they built bridges across the canals the Aztecs tore them down. It was only when Cortez sent his Indian allies ahead to destroy the houses and fill the canals with rubble that the Spanish were able to ride their horses against the Aztecs. Even then the Aztecs fought them step by step until there was no hope left and they had to surrender.

The descendants of the Aztecs still live in Mexico, their ways a mixture of Indian and Spanish. In the other stories you will read about some of these people who live in the modern town of Tepoztlan where before the conquest their ancestors made amatl paper for their overlords the Aztecs.

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Fourth of a Series on

LIFE IN A MEXICAN TOWN

A MEXICAN BOY

by

EDITH FLEMING

Raymond Foundation

CHICAGO NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM
RESEARCH EDUCATION
FOUNDED 1893 BY MARSHALL FIELD

Museum Stories, No. 396

March 24, 1962

A Mexican Boy

High up on the side of a mountain about sixty miles from Mexico City, Pablo is tending the cattle. He looks down the mountain and across the valley to the town of Tepoztlan on the opposite mountain. The leaves of the trees cover the town with a sea of green, but Pablo can see the tower of the big church in the central plaza and then the towers of seven small churches one behind the other up the side of the mountain. The rest of the town is hidden under the green, but Pablo knows it well because he has lived there all the eleven years of his life. His home is far from the central plaza in the barrio, or district of town, called San Sebastian, and the saint's statue is in the local church, which is also called San Sebastian.

Pablo starts to trudge home. In the town there are paved streets, but higher up the streets become narrow paths strewn with boulders. His own street runs across the slope of the hill and makes rough going because it crosses several streams and ravines. Sounds are coming from the houses—children laughing or crying, housewives slapping tortillas into shape. Church bells are ringing. Buses honk as they race by along the main road. A peddler cries his wares. It is busy now, but by nightfall the streets will be dark and quiet. People go to bed early in Tepoztlan.

Pablo's home, like his neighbor's, is made of sun-dried bricks and roofed with tile. At one side is a lean-to that is the kitchen. A little storehouse for corn on the cob is in front of the house. It is about six feet high, made of corn stalks tied together with rope. The door of the one-room house opens into a walled yard where there is a row of cans filled with bright flowers. The water for them comes from the nearest fountain and the family carries it home in pails, for they all love flowers.

Pablo's mother and sister Maria have been working hard all day, cooking and washing and ironing. "You have it much easier than I did when I was young," his mother tells Maria. "I had to get up at four in the morning to grind the corn. Now we take the corn to the mill to be ground."

But of course Mama has kept her metate, or grinding stone, to use in emergencies and to grind coffee and chili peppers for the fiesta. "No woman could set up housekeeping without a grinding stone," she says.

The women are cooking over a fire on a hearth of three stones set in a triangle with a griddle on top. Theirs is built on the floor, but Pablo's aunt, who is richer, has a stove set on a table-height cement platform.

Dinner is ready and Pablo, his older brother Jose, and Papa sit down on low chairs to eat. The table is used only at fiesta time. Mama serves the food in bowls or wrapped in tortillas (flat round cakes of cornmeal mush baked on a griddle). There are toasted beans and cheese, and they are lucky tonight for there is some meat and Mama has made a tasty sauce with chili peppers. After Papa and the older boys have eaten, Mama and the younger children sit on the floor for their meal.

When dinner is over Mama puts out the fire, for they must save on fuel. It is all right now because the weather is mild. But Pablo remembers with a shiver that in the winter they had to go to bed to keep warm.

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Fifth of a Series on

LIFE IN A MEXICAN TOWN

THE FAMILY FARM

by

EDITH FLEMING

Raymond Foundation

CHICAGO NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM
RESEARCH EDUCATION
FOUNDED 1893 BY MARSHALL FIELD

Museum Stories, No. 397

March 31, 1962

The Family Farm

Pablo, his brother Jose, and Papa are up early. The boys are singing. They are going to help in the fields and are happy. Mama has breakfast ready: black coffee, tortillas, and warmed-over beans from the night before. The boys and their father sit down to eat while their mother waits on them. Then they shoulder their farm tools and trudge off to their farm, which is a long way off.

"When I am older I am going to be a farmer like Papa," says Pablo.

Already he has been useful. For two years he has been looking after the cattle, taking them to the pasture in the morning before school and driving them home at night. Often he has done it alone, but sometimes his cousin Juan has worked with him and of course that was more fun.

Papa sighs. "If I weren't so poor I could buy land close to town, and they would be better fields too."

But he is poor, and he has to use poor land. It is covered with great boulders and volcanic outcroppings. We can't even use a plow, Pablo thinks to himself. All the work has to be done by hand, chopping away at the soil with a hoe. To walk between the big stones is hard enough without trying to pull a plow around them.

"Your uncle's fields are fine this year. He can grow much corn because he doesn't have to dig his field with a hoe as we do," says Papa.

"His new plow is very fine," says Pablo, "and he doesn't have far to walk either."

"But he doesn't own his ox team," Jose points out. "He rents it for three months and pays for it out of his corn crop."

"That is true," says Papa. "All the same he can use his land over and over and we must clear new land every three years because poor land wears out fast."

Last January Papa had started to clear a new field. First he cut down the trees. Then with a machete (large knife) he cut down the bushes and shrubs. He worked fifty days. Every night when he came home he was exhausted. "I ache all over," he groaned.

By April the trees and bushes were dry enough to burn and Papa saved the ashes for fertilizer. After that he and the boys built a stone wall to protect the field from grazing cattle. It had been the hardest kind of work, but looking at his field now Papa is proud. "Not a bad job," he says.

Every bit of land has been used. The corn plants are not in rows but are scattered about wherever there is a place for them between the great boulders. It is a special kind of corn with very strong roots that spread in every direction and force their way down through the rocky soil. Between the corn are squash and beans. Not a scrap of ground has been wasted.

At noon they stop work. "Build a fire," says Papa, "and we will heat our dinner."

At home no one would think of cooking—that is woman's work. In the fields it is different. Papa and the boys heat their dinner and squat down upon their heels to munch their food.

"There's a mouse!" cries Jose suddenly and chases it. It disappears among the corn plants.

"Tonight we will set off firecrackers to scare it away," says Papa.

Pablo and his brother smile happily. Like all boys, they love firecrackers.

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Sixth of a Series on

LIFE IN A MEXICAN TOWN

SCHOOL DAYS

by

EDITH FLEMING

Raymond Foundation

Museum Stories, No. 398

April 7, 1962

School Days

It is early morning a week later and the family is busy around the house. Pablo stops piling up the firewood. "You are lucky, Tono," he says to his little brother. "All day long you can play. You don't have to work or to go to school."

"But I have to stay in the patio all day," complains Antonio. "I want to go out into the street. Won't you take me with you today?"

Pablo shakes his head. "You are too little," he says.

Antonio, like the other small children, is kept in the yard, or patio, unless his mother or older brothers and sisters will take him out. It is very boring, he thinks. He tries to amuse himself by playing marbles like the big boys.

Nearby his little sister Felicite is playing house with her rag doll. "Mama," she begs, "may I please have just a little bit of corn to grind so I can make my doll a tortilla?"

Antonio, Felicite, and their brothers and sisters have very few toys. They play with sticks and stones and corncobs and are very good at make-believe.

Antonio is tired of the marbles and throws them to one side. "Let's play we are going to the fiesta," he says. "There is going to be one at Santa Catarina and we are going to it. Make

a circle now and we will dance. See, I am a man on horseback." He does a skipping step like the dancers of Santo Domingo who performed at the last fiesta.

There is a bustle in the patio as Pablo leaves to do his farm chores before school. Antonio and Felicite watch enviously. Little Felicite will be six next month and then she can go to school too. Last year her parents wouldn't let her start for fear too much learning would "heat her head." Most of the children in the town start school, but many drop out each year until by sixth grade there are few left.

Maria, Pablo's older sister, was very sad when she had to stop school and stay at home. She cried a great deal. But Pablo couldn't understand. He would rather roam the country or even work in the fields. He doesn't like school.

"I have to work all the time when I am home," Maria explained. "I haven't a minute to myself. In school I was away from hard work for six whole hours and I could play with girls of my own age as well as study. I loved it."

Pablo and the boys have more freedom than the girls. They like to play hooky and sneak away for games or a walk to another town. During fiesta season, many stay out of school to enjoy the excitement. Then there is time lost in helping with the chores, bringing home water from the fountain, or helping on the farm. Every day Pablo drives the cattle to pasture and afterwards he likes to loiter along and play a game or two. His parents have never minded if he was late to school. "Farm duties come first," they always said. "All the children need to learn is a little reading and writing."

But the teachers think differently. When they saw that no one paid attention to the clock in the town hall striking the hour, they decided that the bell in the great church in the central plaza should be rung every morning and afternoon to let everyone know that school had begun. They even set up a game between the different grades to see whose record of attendance and promptness was the best. Though people in Tepoztlan still feel one hour of daylight is as good as another, Pablo and his friends have found it is best to get to school on time.

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Seventh of a Series on

LIFE IN A MEXICAN TOWN

MARKET DAY

by

EDITH FLEMING

Raymond Foundation

Museum Stories, No. 399

April 14, 1962

Market Day

Pablo, Papa, and Grandpapa get an early start for the city market in Cuernavaca because it takes four hours to get there on foot. Of course it takes only forty-five minutes by bus. "But it costs more centavos than we have," says Papa. Everyone is very gay. Market day means fun and laughter, gossip and news. After awhile they overtake some of their neighbors.

"Now here we go along," they give the traditional greeting.

"Yes, here we go along," the others answer and tramp along together.

Buses pass crowded with people: cloth merchants from Mexico City and vendors from the seven villages around Tepoztlan. But many are walking, as Pablo and his family are. Each village is noted for some special thing. The people of San Juanico bring medicinal plants, which grow only high up on the mountain near their village. The villagers from another hamlet built on a limestone cliff have burned the limestone in special ovens to make the lime that the women in the valley use in preparing the cornmeal mush from which tortillas are made. Santiago, farther down the valley where there is plenty of water and warmth, grows tomatoes and sugar cane. The men of Santa Catarina, where it is dry, bring acacia pods.

"All these people used to sell in the Tepoztlan market," says Grandpapa. "Sometimes there were fifty or even a hundred vendors in the central plaza. Those were the days. The merchants from Santiago set up business in one part of the market and those from Santa Catarina in another. They paid a floor tax for their space and on market day, week after week, squatted on their heels behind their wares. When they grew old their sons took their places. Times have changed since then," he sighs.

Some of the merchants still come to Tepoztlan, but it is mostly day-to-day trading in stores that is carried on there these days. Mama or Maria do a little shopping every day: a few chili peppers, some spices, or a bit of salt or sugar put up in a screw of paper and costing only a few centavos. They never buy very much, just a little every day, because they love the

bargaining and the gossip. The men go to market only to sell their rope. It is the women who enjoy shopping.

"We must hurry," says Papa. They pass the vendors from Santa Catarina who are taking their time.

"We go so as to get there," says Grandpapa politely.

"We go ahead little by little," say the others.

There are wonderful things in the market: vegetables and fruit grown on the little farms and sold by their owners, pottery jars and bowls made at home, shiny stiff shoes, huaraches or sandals, and yards and yards of cloth that Mama and Maria would love. There are flowers and cold drinks made of sweetened water colored red and green. Boys stand by the stalls ready to carry home purchases for anyone who will hire them. There is noise and bargaining and laughter and strange delicious smells. The market is a wonderful place, Pablo thinks to himself. I would like to go every week.

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Eighth of a Series on

LIFE IN A MEXICAN TOWN

THE FIESTA

by

EDITH FLEMING

Raymond Foundation

Museum Stories, No. 400

April 28, 1962

The Fiesta

What a beautiful day for the fiesta! The sky is blue and the air is so clear that the hills and mountains stand out boldly. Many people dressed in their best fill the roads leading to the village of Santa Catarina. They are going to celebrate the feast day of the patron saint of the village.

Two days ago family friends from the village came to Pablo's home in Tepoztlan to invite the whole family to eat the festival dinner with them.

"We have been busy for days," they said. "The women have cleaned the church and swept the churchyard. Just before the fiesta they will decorate it with flowers and tissue paper. They have been cooking and planning the dinner too, and the men have seen to the firecrackers and the candles."

When Pablo and his family reach the church of Santa Catarina they find the yard is full of people. Little Antonio has many questions. "Why are those men digging a hole by the gate?" he asks.

"That is where they are going to set up the pole for the firecrackers," Papa tells him.

"Here come the dancers," someone shouts.

The dancers from Jalatlaco have made a vow to dance at the fiesta this year. Their leaders carry statues of the santo and bright-colored banners with the name of their club. They look very fine, both the men and women, with their tall plumed headdresses and their pink and red costumes embroidered with beads. First they file into the church, where they kneel before they dance and sing. Then they come out into the churchyard to dance again, where more dancers from San Juan and Santiago join them.

A procession winds down the street: women with baskets of flowers and incense, men with the great candles to be burned in the church, musicians with flutes, and a drummer to bring up the rear.

"The firecracker tower is coming," shouts Pablo as more men come into the yard. Bang! Bang! Bang! They set off

gunpowder just to let the people know they are on the way. They shout and grunt and shove as they set the firecracker pole in the hole that has been dug for it, and all the children watch with great excitement.

When it is time to eat, the dancers march off to the home of the sponsor of the fiesta and Pablo and his family join their friends for the great feast. But some people are still staying near the church buying food from the vendors. We are lucky to have friends, Pablo thinks to himself.

"It is almost three," Papa says at last. "We must hurry back for the fireworks."

Little Felicite is not sure she likes it. "Such a noise," she says and puts her hands over her ears.

"Wait until night and then there will be skyrockets and pinwheels," Pablo tells her.

He is right. The night fireworks are even better. At the last with a flash and a great burst of noise the top rocket on the tower explodes. The fiesta is over. "A wonderful day," everyone says as, tired but happy, they start for home.

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